Copy

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA: TOWARD A DESENSITIZATION TO RAPE?

Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz
University of Wisconsin

To what extent do violent depictions of rape and brutality against women in the media influence aggressive behavior? The recent NIMH review (1982) of empirical research on the relationship between televised violence and social behavior has forcefully concluded that these is "overwhelming evidence of a causal relationship between violence on television and later aggressive behavior." But in 1970, the Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography concluded there were no "asocial" effects due to exposure to pornography. What has happened since 1970? First, the pornography itself has changed. It has become more violent and the viewer is more likely to be exposed to scenes of rape. Even commercially released films have become more sexually violent. In a recent address before the International Conference on Film Classification and Regulation, the Rt Hon Lord Harlech of the British Film Board made special note of the recent increase in R-rated sexually violent films and their "erotisizing" and "glorification" of rape and other forms of sexual violence. According to Harlech:

"Everyone knows that murder is wrong, but a strange myth has grown up, and been seized on by filmmakers, that rape is really not so bad. that it may even be a form of liberation for the vicitm, who may be acting out what she secretely desires--and perhaps needs--with no harm done....Filmmakers in recent years have used rape as an exciting and titillating spectacle in pornographic films, which are always designed to appeal to men."

The second change since the 1970 commission report is that increasingly, researchers have been turning their attention to this fusion of sex and violence. The results of this research, which has usually involved exposing subjects to only a few minutes of film, has shown that pornography which presents violent depictions such as rape, can influence both asocial attitudes and behavior. For example, it has been shown that exposure to X-rated depictions of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women can (1) increase the acceptance of rape myths (i.e., that women in fact want to be raped), (2) increase willingness for an individual to say they would commit a rape, (3) increase aggressive behavior against women in a laboratory context, and (4) decrease the sensitivity to rape and rape victims. One question which emerges form this research is the relative contributions of sexual vs. aggressive content. Two major questions have arisen from the research. Is it the "pornography" (i.e. sexual content) or the violence which is really contributing to these asocial reactions? And, what is the effect of prolonged exposure to violence against women?

As depicitons of sex and violence become increasingly graphic, especially in feature length movies shown in theatres, officials at the National Institute of Mental Health are becoming concerned, and note:

"[F]ilms had to be made more and more powerful in their arousal effects. Initially, strong excitatory reactions (may grow) weak or vanish entirely with repeated exposure to stimuli of a certain kind. This is known as "habituation." The possibility of habituation to sex and violence has significant social consequences. For one, it makes pointless the search for stronger and stronger arousers. But more important is its potential impact on real life behavior. If people become inured to violence from seeing much of it, they may be less

likely to respond to real violence."

This loss of "sensitivity" to real violence after repeated exposure to films with sex and violence, or "the dilemma of the detached bystander in the presence of violence" (a topic to which social scientists should be directing more of their efforts according to the Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop) is currently the concern of researchers and health officials. While initial exposure to a violent rape scene may act to create anxiety and inhibitons about such behavior, researchers have suggested that repeated exposure to such material could "counter" these effects.

The effects of long term exposure to sexually violent mass media portrayals is the major focus of a current ongoing research program at the University of Wisconsin in Madsion. Under a three year grasnt from the National Science Foundation to one of the current authors (Donnestein) and Dr. Steven Penrod of the Department of Psychology at Wisocnsin, we are, along with our research staff (Bob Ogles, Carol Krafka, Mike Bross, Ann Savage, Jim Coward, Cindy Hoffner, Margo Chapin), investigating how massive exposure to commercially released violent and sexually-violent films influence: (1) viewer perceptions of violence, (2) judgements about rape and rape victims, (3) general physiological desensitization to violence, and (4) aggressive behavior.

This research presents somewhat of a new approach to the study of mass media violence in a number of ways. First, we will be examining in controlled conditions massive exposure to such materials. Unlike many previous studies in which individuals may have seen only 10-30 minutes of material, the current studies will eventually examine up to 25 hours of exposure. Second, we will be able to monitor the process of desensitization in individual subjects over a longer period of time than have previous experiments. Third, we will examine not only aggressive behavior, but perceptual and judgemental changes regarding violence. Finally, we will look for ways of mitigating these potential negative after-effects of exposure to mass media violence.

In a first study conducted recently to monitor desensitization of males to filmed violence against women and to determine whether this desensitization "spilled over" into other decision making about victims, male subjects watched nearly ten hours (5 commercially released feature length films, one-a-day for 5 days) of R-rated or X-rated fare. Male subjects saw either R-rated sexually violent films such as <u>Tool Box Murders</u>, <u>Vice Squad</u>, <u>I Spit On Your Grave</u>, <u>Texas Chainsaw Massacre</u>; X-rated movies which depicted sexual assault: or X-rated movies which depicted only consenting sex (non violent). The R-rated films were much more explicit with regard to violence than they were with regard to sexual content. After each movie the men completed a mood questionnaire and evaluated the films on several dimensions. The films were counter-balanced so that comparisons could be made of the same films being shown on the first and last day of viewing. Before participation in the study all subjects were screened for high levels of hostility. But, only those with low hostility scores were included in the study. This was done to help guard against the possibility of a overly hostile individual immitating the filmed violence during the week of the films. This is also important to note, since it would suggest that any effects which we may find would occur with a very normal population with regard to violence. It has always been suggested by critics of media violence research that only those who are <u>already</u> predisposed toward violence are influenced by exposure to media violence. In this study,

all those individuals have already been eliminated. After the week of viewing the men watched yet another film. This time, however, they saw a videotaped reenactment of an actual rape trial. After the trial they were asked to render judgements about how responsible the vocitm was for her own rape an how much injury she had suffered.

Most interesting were the results from the men who had watched the R-rated films such as Texas Chainsaw Massacre or Maniac . Initially, after the first day of viewing, the men rated themselves as significantly above the norm for depression, anxiety, and annoyance on a mood adjective checklist. After each subsequent day of viewing, these scores dropped until, on the forth day of viewing, the male's levels of anxiety, depression, and annoyance were indistinguishable from baseline norms. What happened to the viewers as they watched more and more violence?

We argue that they were becoming desensitized to violence, particularly against women. But this entailed more than a simple lowering of arousal to the movie violence. The men began to actually perceive the films differently as time went on. On Day 1 for examole, on the average, the men estimated that they had seen four "offensive scenes." By the fifth day, however, subjects reported only half as many offensive scenes (even though exactly the same movies, but in reverse order were shown). Likewise, their ratings of the violence within the films receded from Day 1 to Day 5. By the last day, the men rated the movies less graphic, less gory, and estimated a fewer number of violent scenes than on the first day of viewing. Most startling, the men by the last day of viewing graphic violence against women were rating the material as significantly less debasing and degrading to women, more humorous, more enjoyable, and claimed a greater willingness to see this type of film again. This change in perception due to repeated exposure was particularly evident in comparisons of reactions to two specific films, I Spit On Your Grave and Vice Squad . Both films contain sexual assault, however rape is portrayed in a much more graphic and detailed manner in the film I Spit On Your Grave and a much more ambiguous manner in Vice Squad .For men who were exoposed first to Vice Squad and then after to I Spit On Your Grave their ratings of sexual violence in the films were nearly identical. However, subjects who had seen the more graphic movie first saw much less sexual violence (rape) in the more ambiguous film.

Male viewers of a rape victim after viewing a reenacted rape trial were also affected by the constant exposure to brutality against women. The victim of rape was rated as significantly more worthless and her injury as significantly less severe by those exposed to filmed violence when compared to a control group of men who saw only the rape trial and did not view any of our films. Desensitization to the violence in the films on the last day was also significantly correlated with assignment of greater blame to the victim for her own rape.

Where does the research go from here? We will continue to investigate desensitization effects both in reported mood and anxiety ratings, as well as pyhsiologically. We will also be investigating aggressive behavior against women in a laboratory context as a function of massive exposure to films portraying violence agsint women. We are also currently investigating the effects of movies that are not explicitly portraying violence against women but that perpetuate ideas about women as sexual objects (the new wave of teenage sex films such as Porky's and My Tutor). Finally, we are interested in all of this

research in attempts to counter the negative effects which we have been finding. The subjects in all of our studies receive extensive debriefing after participation. These take the form of sessions with the experimenters as well as through video taped presentations which dispell certain myths about rape. They also attempt to "resensitize" the subject to the issue of violence, particularly violence against women. Our research has shown a marked decrease in rape myths and the acceptance of violence against women as a function of these debriefings. We are currently investigating the effects which these debriefings will have if presented to subjects "prior" to viewing our films. It is hoped that they will act to counter any negative effects from such massive exposure to mass media violence.